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Special Report



**Stop surviving and start thriving:
Understanding 3 stages of change**

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Imagine yourself in this scenario. You are busy at your computer, catching up on emails or researching information for an upcoming trip. Your phone rings and at the other end of the line someone says, "I need to let you know ..."

And whatever that message is, you are left knowing that in an instant your world has just changed. You sit numbed for a moment, walk into the bathroom and look at yourself in the mirror. Is this really happening to you? What should you do? What will you do? How will you deal with the change?

This is a special report on change, and the change process. You are probably reading it because you are experiencing change in your life or because you want to help someone who is going through change.

While you are reading this, you may change your mind several times about the value of the report. You might change your course of action by putting it down, doing something else, and picking it up later. Or, your phone might ring and your priorities suddenly change. Something else grabs your attention, causing you to change your plans. More than likely you are used to the kinds of interruptions that require you to make changes.

During the course of a day, you change your mind, change your direction, change your routine, and most likely change your clothes without giving it a second thought. You understand that change is natural. Change is normal. Change is routine. We expect to make changes.

So, if change is such a normal process, why do people fear change? Why do we resist change? Why do we dread change? Why is change so painful? Why do we sometimes choose to continue negative or unhealthy behaviors instead of making a change?

The purpose of this report is to shed some light on the subject of change so that you will have more awareness about the change process and how we navigate the course of change.

Although we experience numerous small changes during a regular day, the focus of this report is on the kind of changes that cause us to sit up and pay attention. The kind of changes that cause anxiety,

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fear, anger and a myriad of other emotions. The kind of change that we find ourselves resisting instead of embracing. The kind of change that feels more out of control than in control. Change that happens to us, not change we direct. The kind we may describe as life throwing us a curve ball.

Let's go back to the phone call. Are you wondering what it was about? Here are some possible answers, but you probably have already imagined your own based on your most recent experiences:

The doctor called and said your biopsy report was back. He'd like for you to come in early the next day – and added, “you ought to bring someone with you.”

Your only child, your precious daughter, calls from a friend's house. She's excited because she just found out that she's getting a full scholarship to an art school in Paris. She'll be leaving home (for the first time) in two weeks to begin her life's adventure.

Your boss calls and in a very direct way tells you that he needs to see you the next morning, your job will be changing and HR will help you make some decisions.

Your lawyer called and said that the judge ruled against you in your child custody hearing.

The mortgage company called and said they could not wait any longer before foreclosing on your house. You can expect someone from their brokerage firm the next day.

Your credit card company called and said that the 2 nights, 2 dinners and the spa treatments for two were indeed legitimate charges. Your husband signed for everything, including the gift shop purchases of lingerie (you were not on the trip).

Your brother called and said that Mom has fallen again, the Dr. diagnosed mid-stage Alzheimer's and she must have 24 hour care. He's leaving tomorrow for his 6 month sabbatical in China. When can he drop mom off at your house?

Your son calls and tells you that he is moving in with his friend Simone. They have decided to be life partners and wanted you to be the first to know.

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Whew! Just reading through this list probably gave many readers a sense of anxiety. And some of you probably checked off some items, saying, *I've already been there. I know what they are dealing with.*"

This report is divided into three sections. The first section is a brief lesson on change. Section two focuses on the three phases of change: letting go, transitioning, embracing the new. And section three summarizes the ideas in this material and is designed to inspire you to move forward.

Let's start with "Understanding Change."

Section 1: Understanding Change

First and foremost, we must understand that change is natural, on-going, and necessary for life. As George Bernard Shaw put it, "When people shake their heads because we are living in a restless age, ask them how they would like to live in a stationary one, and do without change?"

What would we do without change? We would become stagnant. We would become bored. We would become extinct!

We will all face challenging changes many times during our life's journey. The longer we live the more changes we'll face. Some of these are expected, though often dreaded – like growing older, a body that changes shape, eyesight or hearing diminishing, gray hair – no hair! And although we know these changes are in store for us, there is often a moment in life when the realization of the change hits us. We see a photo of a younger version of ourselves. We look in the mirror and see our mother or father. We play in a family game of volleyball and the next morning have aches in places we didn't even know we had.

These are important changes to examine, but we are going to concentrate on a different kind of change – externally provoked changes. Changes in the world around us. Changes in our relationships. Changes in how we define ourselves through our work. Changes that are more often than not thrust on us and are not of our doing.

In our world today, there is another type of change that previous generations did not experience.

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Technology has impacted the pace of change more than anything else in our world. Many of you who might be reading this on-line or downloading it did not even own a computer 15 years ago. Have you figured out how to use all the bells and whistles on your new phone? Is your camera obsolete? Can you even change the time on all your digital devices? Unless you were born in the technology age, you probably tense up every time someone suggests that life would be easier with an iPod, iPad, or iPhone video camera. These kinds of changes are stressful, but chances are, with time (and a teenager), you'll deal with temporary anxiety and figure these things out. And you've probably realized by now that today's technology will be obsolete by the time you figure it out.

Yes. We age. Technology evolves. These changes are expected, predictable, and although they may cause temporary frustration, they are manageable. However, most of us will face big and often surprising changes like the ones described in the opening section of this report. These kinds of changes can cause you to question who you are, your role in life, or your belief system. You may feel as if your tether has come undone and you are floating around without stability. Or your anchor is lost and you are drifting without any direction.

In fact, that is what change often conjures up for us. The sense of being out of control – being adrift with no direction. One of the pervading emotions around change is that “I am in this alone” or “no-one understands.” First, be assured that you are not alone in dealing with the magnitude of change in your life. As any personal/professional coach can tell you, almost everyone around you is dealing with their own share of change. Secondly, you might be right. Not everyone does understand the change process. However, reading this report will help you will feel less lost and more in control as you become aware of what is going on internally as change is going on in your external world.

When an external event causes a shift in your world, you will respond. As your world changes, you change. If the situation is negative, your first reaction may include some negative emotions and responses, such as disbelief, confusion, anger, sadness, uncertainty, panic and fear. And, if the change is positive, such as a new marriage, an incredible job opportunity, or a sudden inheritance, you will respond with positive emotions and responses. However, it is not unusual for people to sometimes have negative responses to positive circumstances – change is simply hard, even when it is for the better. I tell this to clients all the time: “Even welcome changes can be hard.”

While most of the principles in this article can help you grow during positive or negative changes,

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this report focuses on the unexpected, and often negative changes that come our way.

It has been said that people only change when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change. What about you? Are you in a situation that is increasingly more painful, but you fear the future? Or, have you had a sudden, uninvited change thrust on you? If so, keep reading.

Section 2: Stages of Change

You know that you will survive change. You've had plenty of practice in life making small and large adjustments. You are equipped with all the skills you need. You just may need to hone some of those skills. Knowing the three stages of change can help you understand what you have gone through during previous changes in your life. This is a simplification of the change model used by William Bridges in his book, *Understanding Transitions* (2011).

“Letting Go” Stage of Change

The first step of change can sometimes be the most painful. In order to move through the change process you will have to let go of something. Something must come to an end. This could be the end of a relationship, end of a job, end of security, or the end of an unfulfilled dream. We must at some point let go of the past to be able to accept and prepare for change.

It is hard on our human nature to let go of what is familiar – even when the old might not serve us well. During the letting go process we usually go through a grieving process. The more attached we are to the old, the more we will grieve.

Most grief professionals agree that the grieving process consists of five stages:

- Denial – Believing that this is “just a dream” or “just a phase”. It’s really not happening.
- Bargaining – Believing that we can negotiate our way back to how things used to be.
- Anger – Feeling intensely about how “unfair” the situation is. We may even experience anger toward other people, believing, *it’s their fault*.
- Sadness – Feeling lost, alone, or vulnerable. Sometimes this can deepen into depression and requires professional help.

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- Acceptance – Realizing that things will not go back to the way they were. You are now ready to move forward.

The order of the stages may shift and you may vacillate from one to the other and back (from anger to sadness and back to anger). The important lesson for you is that you understand that these feelings are normal and are necessary to complete the grieving process. If you find yourself stuck in the grieving process at any step of the way, engage the services of a professional counselor, clergy, or coach to give you guidance.

“Transitional” Stage of Change

Once we have moved through the ‘letting go’ process, we find ourselves in the second phase of change. This is the period of emptiness and uncertainty. This is also called the transitional time - the time between letting go of the old and fully embracing and adapting to the new. During this time you may feel like you are lost. You don’t know what to do. You don’t know what is expected of you. This is unfamiliar territory. Nothing feels the same. The old is gone, the new is unknown and you are in between.

Like a farmer, it is the time that the fields appear to lay barren, but in reality they are becoming nutrient rich for the next crop. This is your opportunity to become nutrient rich. As you review the following ideas, select one or two that you can commit to as you move through the transitional phase of change. If you do, you will be enriching your spirit, your mind, your future relationships, and your skills. And implementing these ideas will make this phase easier to undergo.

1. Do something that makes you feel in control. (And we’re not talking about holding the television remote!). Don’t sit around making excuses about why you can’t do something, just give it a try. Be sure that you choose a project that gently pushes your energy level – and more importantly, one that you can accomplish. Stick to it until you finish.
2. Take stock of your life and choose one or two areas to focus on that can greatly impact your future success. Take action. Take an on-line course, sign up for a language class. Or a dance class. Study other religions. Learn to type using all your fingers! Whatever you do, give it your best effort.
3. Think bigger and bolder. Daydream. Visualize yourself immensely successful. See yourself

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- in a new light. Create a collage of your best self. Your aspirations. Your talents.
4. Do not confuse the present with the past. Remind yourself, in spite of past reactions to change, you are older, more mature, and wiser. You have the skills you need to not just survive, but to thrive during this newest change.
 5. Accept that this is an awkward stage. (Think about the chrysalis on the cover of this report: The butterfly emerging is not yet beautiful!) Ask for patience and support from people who are in your corner. Ask them to be patient, but not to let you become complacent.

The transitional time of change is an opportunity to evaluate any previous decisions you might have made. What did you learn? What should you learn in order to prevent a similar experience from happening? What will you do differently the next time you are in a related situation?

Remember, old habits are hard to unlearn. You might be tempted to rush into the first relationship that comes your way. Or take a work position that is completely unsuited for you. Or start another business that has an equal chance of failing. The transition time is the time for you to *sort out* the past *without recreating* the past.

“Starting Anew” Stage of Change

The third phase of change is starting anew. Patience may be required as you embrace a new situation or a new identity. Take small steps as you learn the skills, habits, and behaviors associated with the new. Avoid the temptation to replicate the old. Look at opportunities with fresh eyes – a fresh spirit. Most people find that in retrospect, the change they feared and dreaded was indeed an opportunity for growth. And that is what thriving is all about.

Carl Brand sums it up nicely, “Though one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending.” That quote is important to digest. Your future depends on more than you surviving the latest (or the next) change in life. It depends on your thriving – even flourishing.

If you are having difficulty believing this right in this moment, then try this exercise: Phone or email at least 3 friends or relatives. Ask them to share with you a change they have experienced in their lives that literally transformed their life in a positive way. They will be glad you asked and you will grow to appreciate the changes you are experiencing even more.

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Section 3: Summary

Perhaps the following bullet points will help reinforce what you've already learned:

- Change is the normal process of life. Life is not possible without change.
- It is human nature to resist change. Most of us like what is familiar and predictable.
- As normal as change is, it is normal to resist it. You are not wrong, bad, or stubborn simply because you resist change.
- It is common to fear the unknown.
- Change can cause us to question our long held beliefs and values.
- Moving through change can be uncomfortable and feel awkward, and is the only way to move forward.
- Refusing to change does not mean that the world won't change around you. Refusing to change means you'll be left behind.
- As harsh as this may sound, some of us resist change because we are lazy. We simply don't want to invest our energy and time – we don't want to commit to a new way of being.
- And to end on a reassuring note, the ability to change, adapt and move forward often offers us new and wonderful opportunities beyond our imagination.

Remember that phone call at the beginning of this report? Chances are, you will have – or have recently had – similar experiences. In the past, you may have slipped into your old habits and perhaps panicked, resisted the change, or stayed in denial. But now, using a simple model to see what is happening, you are now equipped with new knowledge and new skills to help you not only accept the changes you experience, but to embrace them. When life throws you a curve ball, take time to review your newly discovered knowledge about the stages of change.

You will find that you will not only survive during challenging times, but you will thrive!

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